

Town of Ocean Grove
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
At Eastern terminus of State Route 33,
South of Asbury Park
Ocean Grove
Monmouth County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1007

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF OCEAN GROVE

HABS No. NJ-1007

- Location: New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, at Eastern terminus of State Route 33, South of Asbury Park, Ocean Grove, Monmouth County, New Jersey.
- Significance: Ocean Grove, the first religious resort located on the Jersey shore, was founded in the 1860s during the post Civil War revival of Christian enthusiasm for rustic retreats. Methodist ministers chose land only six miles south of famous Long Branch, which offered the combined benefits of healthful seashore and sheltering pine trees.
- History: The square mile Ocean Grove sits on, between the Atlantic Ocean and what are now Route 71 and the New Jersey Transit commuter rail line, was primeval dune, scrub, and trees until after the Civil War. "America was emerging from a period of rapid change," concludes one scholar, and Ocean Grove was an attempt by a dissatisfied group, the upper middle class, to create, in all this chaos, a stable, spiritual, homogeneous environment.¹

According to a modern history published by the Camp Meeting Association, the Ocean Grove meeting was originally conceived by ten families who experienced "rest and religious fellowship on the land that is now known as Founders Park."² The Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association, a group of thirteen ministers and thirteen citizens, was organized in 1869 to collectively govern the settlement. After receiving a charter from the New Jersey legislature, the Association sponsored the first Camp meeting in summer 1870.

The spirit of Ocean Grove developed around its summer meetings, held in August for ten to fourteen days, often attracting more than 10,000 people. That first summer, preachers assembled in "an octagon capable of seating seventy-five ministers," while the congregation sat on plank benches under a grove of trees.³ The association founders recalled the beauty of a frame structure covered with tree boughs built to shelter the congregation--the predecessor of the great auditorium. Under the leadership of the Camp Meeting Association, the town grew in accordance with a strict code of rules. Dancing, card playing, alcohol, tobacco and driving on Sundays were forbidden.

Rather than being sold outright, lots were leased by the church for ninety-nine year terms, with the option to renew, ostensibly "to maintain control over the character of the population."⁴ The tents were the first structures to appear, around an open,

¹ Brenda Parnes, "Ocean Grove: A Planned Leisure Environment," in Paul Stellhorn, ed., Planned and Utopian Experiments: Four New Jersey Towns (Trenton, N.J.: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1980), 29.

² "A Brief History of Ocean Grove" (Ocean Grove: Camp Meeting Association, ca 1991), n.p.

³ "A Brief History of Ocean Grove," n.p.

⁴ Kobbe, 50.

octagonal tabernacle.⁵ With at least reasonable assurance of tenure, many families elected to build. By 1875 there were 600 tents, 400 cottages, and seventy-nine hotels and boarding houses.⁶ Growth was spurred by the extension of the New York and Long Branch Railroad, which provided quick access from New York and Philadelphia after 1875. Ocean Grove's street plan, intentionally dense to foster a sense of community,⁷ was laid down by local civil engineer Frederick Kennedy and his son Isaac,⁸ who would later design Asbury Park. The plan required buildings on the two blocks closest to the shore to be gradually set back as approaching the ocean, thus opening up the view, catching summer breezes, and making the approach to the sea appear shorter. An embodiment of Ocean Grove's moral rectitude, the physical environment was kept in excellent condition. The association supervised a number of municipal services including street upkeep, sewage disposal, and police and fire departments.⁹

Despite the solemn and sober demeanor suggested by the social laws regulating life in Ocean Grove, the town also displayed a playful side, particularly reflected in its architecture. Ocean Grove buildings seemed to jump from the pages of contemporary pattern books, like those of such influential tastemakers as Andrew Jackson Downing, who in popular books such as Cottage Residences advocated romantic country villas in pastoral settings.¹⁰ The small lots here precluded full realization of this ideal, but rural cottages in a picturesque Carpenter Gothic style adapted well to Ocean Grove's narrow streets and its several boulevards. Cottages had narrow facades, extensive porches, and details that not only reflected the Gothic Revival style of the time but were appropriately church-like, with such features as windows with pointed tops, and extensive wood scrollwork. While many buildings have been altered and such details removed, others remain largely intact, such as the row of cottages and hotels on the north side of Ocean Pathway, which leads from the Great Auditorium to the beach, remain.

Today structures reflecting a range of periods dot the streets. The house at 24-A Atlantic Ave., with gray weathered shingles, and an upstairs porch with shingled sides and parapets, is a diminutive version of the great seaside cottages built in ritzier, more

⁵ "A Brief History of Ocean Grove," n.p.

⁶ Gail Hunton and Jennifer Boyd, A Home Renovator's Guide for Historic Ocean Grove (Ocean Grove, NJ: Ocean Grove Home Owners Association. Ocean Grove Chamber of Commerce, 1989), 6.

⁷ Hunton and Boyd, 7.

⁸ "Plan of the Ocean Grove Camp Ground, Monmouth Co., N.J.," (Deal, New Jersey: F.H. Kennedy & Son, Civil Engineers and Surveyors, n.d., Collection of Monmouth College library, Long Branch N.J.)

⁹ Charles A. Parker. "Ocean Grove, New Jersey: Queen of the Victorian Methodist Camp Meeting Resorts," 22-23.

¹⁰ Russell Lynes, The Tastemakers (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1954), 24.

cash-driven developments such as Bay Head and Elberon. Next door, at 26 Atlantic Ave., a more elaborate shingled cottage with an upstairs porch deeply recessed behind shingled supports, and side bay windows for ventilation, likely dates from the 1880s or 1890s. This building is among a handful of Ocean Grove houses that still have their original slate roofs. The slates were cut across the grain diagonally and given points so that when mounted the roof is a pattern of hexagons.

For those who could not afford summer homes in Ocean Grove--and despite the density and modesty of its buildings this was probably the majority of Americans at this time¹¹ rambling--wood-frame hotels were built. These hotels were generally smaller and less elaborate than hotels at Long Branch or Atlantic City. Examples still standing include the now-closed Queen Hotel at Ocean Pathway and Ocean Avenue, pictured with green shutters in a 1910 postcard. Another hotel no longer open, the Aurora, is a remarkably intact Stick Style hotel facing Atlantic and Surf avenues. Other examples, including the Polonaise on Main Avenue, the House-by-the-Sea on Ocean Avenue, and the Sampler Inn, famous for its family-style cafeteria, remain open for business, though eclectically altered. Some budget hostels offered accommodation with privileges in a common kitchen, however only a few are still configured that way.

The Great Auditorium, which was erected in ninety-two days in 1894, is a great wood edifice supported by bridge-like iron trusses laid on stone foundations. Originally constructed without nails, these and other minor changes have since crept into the design. But it remains largely unchanged from its original design, even to the lighting system, which celebrated the newly invented incandescent lamp by using clear bulbs boldly unadorned in rows along the vast wood-panelled ceiling. Known for fine acoustics, the auditorium has attracted the noted and the notorious during its nearly 100 years, and remains the focus of both religious and secular cultural life in Ocean Grove each summer. Classical and popular music concerts featuring the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra and Patti Page, for instance, are held there. Its 1907 Hope Jones organ is capable of simulating many sounds of an orchestra.¹² In August 1950, one visitor wrote on a postcard of the auditorium, "we went to this place for church Sunday. It seats 10,000 and I guess there were at least 9,000 there."¹³ Among those who have spoken or performed at the Great Auditorium are presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Ulysses Grant and Richard Nixon, opera great Enrico Caruso, and evangelist Billy Sunday, who appeared in summer 1916.¹⁴

¹¹ Parnes, 32.

¹² "The Great Auditorium Organ," Brochure (Ocean Grove, N.J.: Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association, ca. 1990).

¹³ Message from postcard, author's collection.

¹⁴ Wilson, 940.

Today Ocean Grove comprises one of the most physically and culturally intact communities on the Jersey shore. The town's preservation has been assisted by the community's long tradition as a religious retreat and seasonal resort, which prevented the common patterns of investment and redevelopment that would have wiped out many buildings and patterns of living long ago. As one commentator observed in 1991, "to the outsider, Ocean Grove seems stuck in a time warp and appears not to have changed much since it was founded."¹⁵ Another observer stated, "unspoiled by mass development, Ocean Grove is a walk-in museum."¹⁶ Today, Ocean Grove appears in some ways more authentic than that seaside resorts that have been consciously brought back to an earlier time.

Now an historic district, Ocean Grove requires approval of renovation plans by a Board of Adjustment which, in turn, asks for a Certificate of Appropriateness from a Board of Architectural Review. Besides the well-known buildings, less celebrated details testify to the extent Ocean Grove has carried the past into the present. Its boardwalk is lit with old pole-top street lamps, made in New Jersey by Westinghouse, which were widely used in American cities in the early twentieth century. The lamps are in need of a paint job but otherwise are intact, and in many cases, the original glass fixtures are in place, with light still provided by incandescent bulbs. This soft effect lends magic to the boardwalk at night. Elsewhere, on Main Avenue at Pilgrim Pathway, are two iron five-ball clusters, today in need of restoration. These are rare examples of the first generation of electric street lighting from the age of the "Great White Way," when American city fathers embraced electric lighting as a symbol of progress.

A long tradition of Ocean angling survives at the Ocean Grove fishing pier, which is now 100 years old. On Main Avenue, Nagel's Pharmacy carries on an old American tradition by maintaining an ice cream and soda fountain as an adjunct to their drug store. At the north end of the boardwalk, abutting sadly declined Asbury Park, sits a white, wood beach pavilion. It is now partially boarded up, battered by storms and greatly altered from when it was built around 1900. Daemart's, a discount store, occupies the boardwalk front adjoined by the still active Homestead restaurant. Old postcards show beach revellers enjoying the building's two shaded decks, which were open to the seabreeze.¹⁷

Today, a community of about 115 tents remains in Ocean Grove. Early postcards show tents with striped canopies and khaki canvas, remarkably similar to the tents still

¹⁵ James A. McConville, "Ocean Grove: God's Square Mile of Health and Happiness," The Bridge: A Magazine for Alumni and Friends of Brookdale Community College (Lincroft, N.J.: Spring 1991), 12.

¹⁶ Santelli, 43.

¹⁷ "New Pavilion, Ocean Grove, N.J.," (New York: Valentine & Sons Publishing Co., ca. 1910, Collection, Monmouth College Library).

found at Ocean Grove in 1991.¹⁸ "Tents consist of three parts: a front canopy or shirt, a main part which attaches to a wooden structure, and a fly sheet which fits over the tent itself."¹⁹ Tent design is regulated by the Camp Meeting Association, which has maintained an arrangement for tent fabrication with a local awning manufacturer for sixty-three years.²⁰ The tents are evidence of the extent to which Ocean Grove's physical and cultural characteristics--neighborliness, use of porches, and narrow intimate streets--have created a secure urban environment, where eyes on the street, rather than police or high-intensity streetlights, provide security. As a speaker reflected at an historical association meeting in August 1991, "people feel safe enough around here to live behind a wall of canvas."²¹

Ocean Grove's religious foundation has inspired comment from the outside world, not all of it laudatory. "I cannot think of the lake and bridges by which one enters this resort otherwise than of the moat and drawbridges of some medieval fortified town governed by an autocrat," Kobbe declared as early as 1889.²² In this century, social critics have used the imagery of religion on the Jersey Shore to satirize evangelism in America as practiced by people like Billy Sunday at places like Ocean Grove. In the 1927 novel Elmer Gantry, by Sinclair Lewis, female evangelist Sharon Falconer buys a gaudy pier to use for revival meetings at the fictitious town of Clontar, "a resort on the New Jersey coast." Lewis wrote, "Sharon christened it 'The Waters of Jordan Tabernacle,' added more and redder paint, more golden gold, and erected an enormous revolving cross, lighted at night with yellow and ruby electric bulbs."²³ Some of this religious showmanship does exist in otherwise sober Ocean Grove, where an illuminated cross was added to the auditorium tower and where, at Sunday services, a giant electric American flag sign can be made to undulate through the use of rows of flashing lights. During services the electric signs to either side of the huge room advising, "Holiness to the Lord" on the left, "So be ye holy" on the right, appear unchanged today from postcards dating from the 1930s.

Meanwhile, religious idealism notwithstanding, Ocean Grove shares with many other shore towns in that it is overwhelmingly white--99 percent as of 1988.²⁴ Yet in other ways it is more diverse than its neighbors, able to offer a range of housing to

¹⁸ "Avenue of Tents, Ocean Grove N.J.," postcard (np, ca 1910, in New Jersey Collection, Guggenheim Memorial Library, Monmouth College, Long Branch, N.J.)

¹⁹ McConville, 14.

²⁰ McConville, 14.

²¹ Reference from Meeting of Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association.

²² Kobbe, 52.

²³ Sinclair Lewis, Elmer Gantry (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1927), chapter 15.

²⁴ Nancy Crotti, "Life in Ocean Grove Slower-Paced, Friendly," Asbury Park Press (Asbury Park, N.J., 31 July 1988), NP.

accommodate many economic groups and ages. Many elderly seemed to find the walking scale and neighborliness of the town attractive. It has what appears to be a built-in social support system, in which neighbors, mail deliverers, realtors and others watch out for those less able.

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Project Information:

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